

Are We Ready for College-Ready?

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Through the years, educators, parents, and the general public believed that a college degree is one of the most powerful strategies for our nation's war on poverty.

The increased earning power of individuals with college degrees and the contribution to our economic security were frequently acknowledged. Our commitment and attention to college readiness, persistence, and success intensified after President Obama announced, in his 2011 State of the Union Address, the goal of moving America from 12th place globally back to number one in the proportion of young people with a college degree. The urgency to return to number one by 2020 was coupled with the prediction that by 2018, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require a college education.

Meeting the moral and economic challenges facing our country require intensifying our attention to the PreK-16 education of all students, especially low-income, underrepresented, first generation college-goers. Only nine out of 100 students from the lowest-income quartile earn a college degree. Some underserved students do not enroll in college because their parents, schools, and communities do not provide the academic preparation, college knowledge and financial information needed to enroll in college. Others enroll in college, but choose colleges with low retention and graduation rates, reducing the probability that they will graduate. Students often drop out because they get stuck in non-credit bearing remedial courses. Even academically prepared students drop out when they do not have the college knowledge, attitudes or financial resources needed for college persistence and success. Since every person who is the first in a family to graduate from college has the potential to lift their family permanently out of poverty, we must work “with all deliberate speed” to remove these barriers.

For more than four decades, I have had the honor and privilege to collaborate with educators, advocates, and community leaders with the highest expectations for low-income and working-class families. They do not accept the “soft bigotry of low expectations” or offer excuses for the daunting challenges of an economic recession. They continue to believe in and promote the power of a college degree, and advocate for programs and policies to meet President Obama’s goal. College readiness is their north star, not outperforming the comparable neighborhood school, the district or state averages or average performance of affluent students on the state assessment. They strive to equip their preK-12 students with the academic, financial, social, and emotional skills to keep their eyes on the prize of securing a college degree and being a lifelong learner.

An increasing number of breakthrough schools, school districts, and charter management networks are changing their own metric of success from the number of students that graduate from high school to the number of alumni that graduate with a post-secondary degree. They are actively tracking their alumni to gather better data about the post-secondary enrollment, retention, persistence and graduation of their students to inform their own secondary programs.

These breakthrough performers are committed to establishing proof points even while naysayers are asking if a college degree is necessary. They acknowledge skyrocketing college costs, an above \$25,000 average debt owed by recent college graduates, and the difficulty for recent college graduates to find work that requires a four-year degree. And they know that The Grad Nation Report declares that the 2020 graduation rate is not attainable because our pace of progress is too slow.

Innovators with promising ideas and proven programs that can be scaled acknowledge these hurdles as challenges to overcome, not reasons to continue the status quo, accept current results, or expect diminished futures for low-income students.

These organizations exceed the national average for college readiness, persistence, and success with the chronically underserved. When asked about their secret sauce, the following innovations are the most frequently cited:

- Align teacher effectiveness, college-ready standards, courses, and assessments as well as increase personalized learning.
- Reduce college debt by providing opportunities for students to earn college credits while in high school through dual enrollment and by passing AP courses.
- Build partnerships between high schools and colleges to enhance communication between secondary and post-secondary educators and to help students transition to life beyond high school.
- Use websites like CollegeMeasure.org and CollegeResults Online to facilitate good college matches.
- Secure financial packages that enable students to graduate with less than \$7,500 in debt.
- Provide career advice on how to complete college in four or fewer years with a major or minor in a career with improved employment opportunities.

After 18 years of study and research on college and career readiness, David T. Conley published an Educational Policy Improvement Center brief in May 2012 defining post-secondary readiness as the ability to enter a post-secondary, entry-level course without the need for remedial or developmental coursework. He identified Four Keys to College and Career Readiness: key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, key transition knowledge and skills, and key learning skills and techniques. He acknowledges other important factors not addressed by his definition, such as parent support

and financial capability to attend college. However, he concludes that his Four Keys to College and Career Readiness are the areas in need of most direct attention and generally under the most direct control of schools.

KIPP, the Knowledge is Power Program, is a national network of free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory public charter schools that work to prepare students in underserved-communities for success in college and life. KIPP serves more than 39,000 students in 125 schools in 20 states and the District of Columbia. Eighty-five percent of the students are eligible for free/reduced price meals. In *The Promise of College Completion*, KIPP identifies five interrelated factors instrumental in helping their students who live in concentrated poverty graduate from college in numbers that exceed national averages. The five factors are: academic readiness; a powerful set of character strengths; the right college match; social and academic integration on the college campus; and college affordability and financial literacy.

Eighty-three school districts and charter schools serving four million students have adopted socioeconomic integration and diversity as a key factor in their pre-college readiness strategy. They apply research on the power of diversity to accelerate academic performance and enhance the probability of college success at a faster pace than schools in racially and socioeconomically isolated communities. A first generation college-goer from the Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST) demonstrated the power of diversity when she declined her college's post-secondary diversity support and asserted that she was prepared at DSST to be an active member of an ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse community.

Growth mind-set, a flexible view of learning, is yet another factor that college readiness practitioners are adding to their success equations. In partnership with the Raikes Foundation and the Chicago Consortium on School Research, college-ready networks are applying the research of Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck to dispel the notion that intelligence is static and to learn how to help students develop a mindset of "mastery" and "growth" so that they do not give up when learning

is challenging.

Just as no single key factor can guarantee college readiness, no single cut score alone can define college readiness. Nonetheless, the 2012 ACT results and the College Board State Capital Campaign suggest that we are far from achieving President Obama's goal of being number one in the proportion of young people with a college degree by 2020. We have identified key success factors but we have not demonstrated the political will to scale these key factors fast enough to transform the lives of the most underserved and to return to a global leadership position.